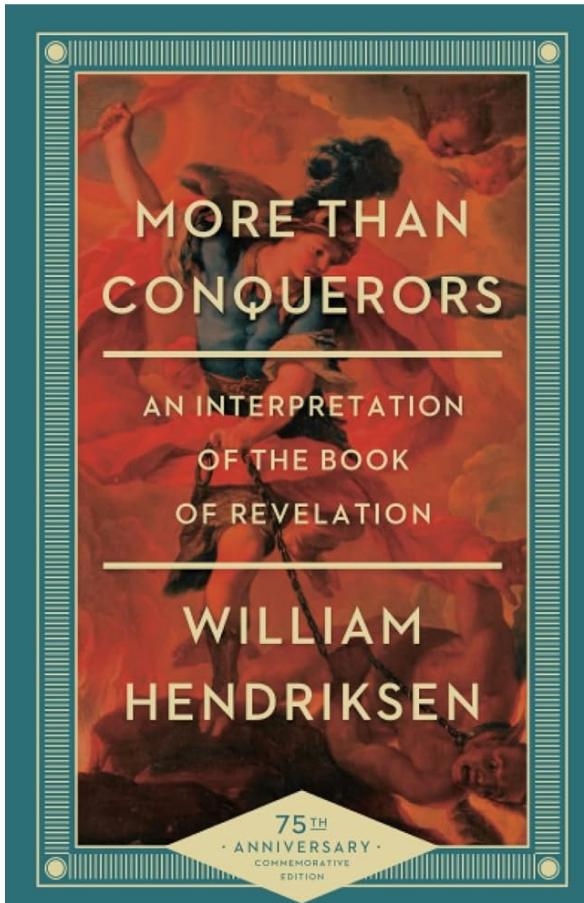


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Review of Hendricksen's "More Than Conquerors"



How are we to understand the Book of Revelation? This is a question of great relevance for getting a New Testament understanding of eschatology and redemptive history, since Revelation is the only book of the new covenant wholly devoted to last things. It is also greatly relevant for any pastoral ministry today, since research consistently shows that lay Christians and sometimes even unbelievers are most interested in the Book of Revelation, while pastors and teachers tend to approach this complex book with trepidation.

Today, most conservative Christians consult the latest Bible prophecy bestseller, focused on current events, to understand the Book of Revelation. Liberal scholarship that is the focus of mainline denominations emphasizes Revelation as pertaining to the past of

New Testament times. An important historic conservative third perspective is set forth in the commentary *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, written by Dutch New Testament scholar William Hendrickson on the eve of World War II in 1939.

Hendrickson's commentary is rooted in the amillennial prophetic understanding. Instead of a future 1,000-year reign of Christ before eternity, there is but one future coming of Jesus. The rapture, the Second Coming and the final judgment are understood as one great climactic event at the end of history in this view. The Book of Revelation, in Hendrickson's view, is seen to have a past, present and future application.

Much of our understanding of Revelation is based on our perception of the intended audience. For Hendrickson, the Apocalypse was written by the Apostle John to persecuted believers under the late First Century Roman

Emperor Domitian. But saints of all ages suffering for their faith were in view, until the church achieves final victory at Christ's glorious Second Advent.

Writes Hendricksen,

"Although it is true that we must take our starting point in the age in which John lived, and must even emphasize the fact that the conditions which actually prevailed during the last decade of the first century A.D. furnished the immediate occasion for this prophecy, we should give equal prominence to the fact that this book was intended *not only* for those who first read it but for all believers throughout the entire dispensation."

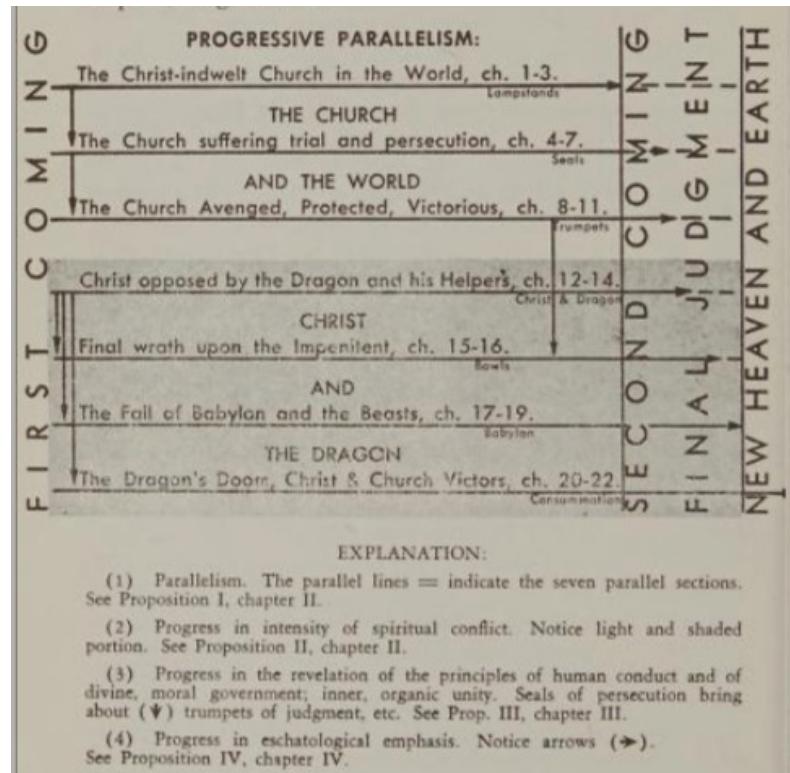


Figure 1: The progressive parallelism approach to Revelation in *More Than Conquerors*

In Hendricksen's view, the events of Revelation represent recurring events. They occurred during the time of the early church (which helps explain why the prophecies will shortly come to pass as John writes in Revelation 1:1). They recur throughout the church age. But they will have an unprecedented crescendo fulfillment at the end of the world.

"Many of the predictions in which the book abounds concern principles and happenings which are so broad in their scope that they cannot be confined to one definite year or century – e.g., the seals, trumpets, bowls – but span the centuries, reaching out to the Great Consummation," writes Hendricksen.

This perspective is sure to ire futurists, who see the spectacular judgments of Revelation as only pertaining to the last few years of human history. Preterists will also be challenged by the author's Scripture-focused assertion that Revelation does indeed point to last things – along with other things in between.

While probably not the original exponent of the theory, *More Than Conquerors* is perhaps the most cogent explanation of progressive parallelism. In this approach to the Apocalypse, the book can be divided into seven sections, each spanning the entire church age and culminating in the

Second Advent. With each telling, the Scriptures focus more on one aspect or another of God's plan for the ages, and the reality of the Second Coming becomes more prominent and emphasized.

Recognizing the importance of defending such a view with Scripture, Hendricksen spends six chapters of his work setting forth nine propositions that he believed support this thesis. It is only then that Hendricksen's commentary begins.

Unlike many commentaries, Hendricksen does not go verse-by-verse through the Scriptures. He does touch on each chapter of Revelation, but often with large brushstrokes. Therefore, the commentary might be best read alongside the Book of Revelation itself, but perhaps also with a concordance, Bible dictionary or even more in-depth commentary for a different perspective or for additional light on more minute passages.

Hendricksen seems most focused on helping the reader understand what the Book of Revelation is all about, both from the perspective of the original reader and today's Christian, on up to the end of time.

In my opinion, Hendricksen's approach is a strong one for several reasons. For one, it helps us avoid the pitfalls of either futurism or preterism while staying focused on the ultimate victory through Jesus. It helps us focus more on the "big picture" without getting bogged down in endless controversies surrounding details on such features as the Mark of the Beast, the Two Witnesses or the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. And it helps us better connect the message of Revelation to God's overall plan of redemption, which spans the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.

Despite these benefits, Hendricksen's approach raises some serious concerns, most notably, a lack of attention to detail. For instance, units of time in Revelation, such as 3 ½ years, 42 months and 1,000 years, are reduced to mere symbolism without any ironclad interpretive structure for understanding these units of time. I feel this lack of consistency puts any firm interpretation on shaky ground.

Hendricksen rejects the dispensational view that God has separate plans for ethnic Israel and the Gentile church. This perspective is certainly an available viewpoint for Christians. On the other hand, on a few occasions, Hendricksen dabbles perilously close to anti-Semitism, when describing the persecution Christians faced at the hands of First Century Jewish opponents as recounted in the Letters to the Seven Churches. Hendricksen's generalization of these statements against Jewish opponents seems problematic, and it is likely the author might have approached these passages differently just a few years

later after the Holocaust. Still, as a whole, Hendricksen asserts the very New Testamental perspective that God's people come out of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, all united as one people in Christ.

In keeping with the "big picture" approach, Hendricksen rejects injecting geography into eschatology. "The N.T. simply does not contain any predictions which apply to certain specific present-day nations or states, to these and to these only. It describes the struggle between the church and the world. It says nothing that refers exclusively or even specifically to China, Japan, the Netherlands, or Louisiana!" he writes. While I appreciate Hendricksen's desire to be above national politics, the lack of geographic focus is a bit too restrictive in a sense. For instance, the final Antichrist power that Hendricksen fully believes will come must out of necessity arise out of some particular corner of the world, though we may not be sure from which direction it will appear. But denying any geographic context is a bit of a step away from reality.

Even while rejecting a headline-focused approach, the times in which Hendricksen wrote cannot be entirely absent from his commentary. References to 1930s missionary martyrs John and Betty Stam, the Ohio River floods, the rise of Hitler and Mussolini, and Roosevelt's New Deal programs remind us that every author is at least somewhat a product of their times, despite strong attempts at a universal message. Additionally, futurists might take some heart at some mentions of Hendricksen to more modern imagery. For instance, "these are not ordinary horses. They clearly symbolize war-engines, war-tools of every description. Think of tanks, cannons, battleships, etc. All this terrible death-dealing war-machinery, causing destruction on every side...is included in the symbolism of these "horses.'" Today's dispensational futurists might see a prototype of Hal Lindsey's view of modern technologies such as helicopters being described in the Apocalypse.

In summary, I feel Hendricksen does a masterful job in reawakening us to the true purpose of the Book of Revelation: to remind suffering Christians of every era that they are truly eternal overcomers through Christ's imminent victory. Keeping this in view, it becomes clear why so many totalitarian regimes so strongly oppose the teaching of the Book of Revelation. I feel Hendricksen's commentary is a good addition to any Christian's library to remind us of the "big picture" and to lift us out of our current moment to what Christians throughout the age have believed. On the other hand, I feel the lack of attention to detail will make many readers feel that Hendricksen's interpretations are lacking in some places. I do believe non-believers would gain from an understanding of the essential message of Bible prophecy. Overall, I feel Hendricksen's book is the best attempt, albeit an imperfect one, to interpret Revelation with the rest of Scripture in view and not tied to

either the past or the future. This is a very challenging task and HendrickSEN made a laudable effort.

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